

BULGARIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the "traditional" religion, exempting it from having the court registration required for all other religious groups. Members of some minority religious groups expressed concern that the government did not proactively intervene to prevent societal abuses. Reports of intolerance by security services and local authorities continued during the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Discrimination, harassment, and general public intolerance of some religious groups remained a persistent problem. Anti-Semitic incidents and vandalism against mosques persisted.

The U.S. embassy regularly communicated with government officials and religious leaders to discuss and promote religious freedom, and facilitated dialogue among religious groups from both countries.

Section I. Religious Demography

The 2011 census reports the population is 7.4 million. According to the census, 76 percent of the population identifies itself as Orthodox Christian. Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism all hold a historic place in the country's culture. Muslims are the second largest religious group, estimated at 10 percent of the population. Groups together constituting about 2 percent of the population include Catholics, Armenian Christians, Jews, evangelical Protestants, and others. There are 115 registered religious groups in addition to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC).

Some religious minorities are concentrated geographically. Many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and "Pomaks" (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule) live in the Rhodope Mountains along the southern border with Greece. Ethnic Turkish and Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. Nearly 40 percent of Catholics live in and around Plovdiv. The majority of the small Jewish community

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lives in Sofia and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are widely dispersed, but are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The law allows private religious observance only if members of the religious group are the only persons present, and public religious observances only if they also are open to persons who do not belong to the sponsoring group.

The constitution stipulates that Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the traditional religion. The law designates the Metropolitan of Sofia as the BOC's patriarch and establishes the BOC as a legal entity, exempting it from the court registration that is mandatory for all other religious groups that wish to acquire national legal recognition. The state provides funding for all registered religious groups.

To receive national legal recognition, groups other than the BOC must apply for official court registration, which generally is granted. The Council of Ministers' Directorate for Religious Affairs provides expert opinions on registration matters upon request of the court. All applicants have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the court of appeals. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of the registered groups, only that the branches notify local authorities of their national registration.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines. The law allows publishing religious media and distributing religious literature. However, some municipal ordinances require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places.

Public schools at all levels offer an optional religious education course that covers Christianity and Islam. The course examines the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of religion and introduces students to the moral values of different religious groups. All officially registered religious groups can request that their religious beliefs be included in the course's curriculum.

The government does not permit religious headdresses in official photos for national identity documents. The law does not allow any privilege to be based on

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religious identity. The education ministry and most schools interpret that provision to ban the display of "religious symbols," including wearing the hijab, in public schools.

In December Bulgaria became an official observer on the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. In addition, the government grants leave upon request to members of non-Orthodox religious groups, including Muslims, Catholics, Jews, evangelical Christians, and Bahais to observe religious holidays.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Many Muslim leaders continued to complain of harassment from the security services, alleging that the national security services brought in imams and muftis repeatedly for questioning as a form of intimidation.

On September 18, Pazardjik District Court launched a trial against 13 Muslim leaders. The defendants were charged in 2011 with participating in an illegal organization, spreading anti-democratic, pro-Sharia ideology aimed at undermining the rule of law and basic human rights, and preaching intolerance and hatred of other religious groups during Friday sermons. Several witnesses stated at the trial that they had given testimony under duress. One witness said that the security services threatened him and his family. The chief mufti's office continued to maintain the innocence of the defendants and labeled the proceedings an attack on religious freedom. At year's end, the trial was still ongoing.

Some marginal political parties reportedly exploited religious problems for political purposes. For example, extreme nationalist parties Internal Revolutionary Macedonian Organization (VMRO), Ataka, and National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria protested in front of the court house in Pazardjik against the wearing of religious attire and the spread of Islam. The ultranationalist party Ataka continued to protest mosques using loudspeakers for the call to prayer. In October the party also called for a ban on the construction of mosques in the country.

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In May a student complained to the Commission for Protection against Discrimination because she was banned from attending school unless she stopped wearing a headscarf. The commission heard the case in November and its decision was pending at the end of the year.

Some minority religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to face discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities, despite obtaining national registration from the Sofia city court. Contrary to the law, the municipalities claimed that the groups had to register locally.

Contrary to the law, some municipalities, such as Burgas and Petrich, restricted certain forms of proselytizing, such as door-to-door, and prohibited the distribution of religious literature, even by groups that were registered locally. The Directorate for Religious Affairs stated both local governments and uniformed police were largely unaware that these activities were legal and needed training.

The statute of limitation for restitution cases was set to expire in 2013, but a number of major claims remained outstanding. The chief mufti recently asked the president to help him extend the deadline for complex Muslim property cases.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim communities reported problems obtaining construction permits for new prayer houses and mosques. The local government in Blagoevgrad continued to ignore the Muslim community's long-standing application for a permit to renovate its mosque. The Varna municipality continued to obstruct the building of a Jehovah's Witnesses house of worship. The Sofia municipal government continued to withhold permission for building a second mosque in Sofia, even though the existing one was so small that worshippers had to pray outside on the sidewalk during Friday and holiday prayers.

The state budget allocated 3 million leva (\$2.02 million) for registered religious groups. Of the total, 2.3 million leva (\$1.55 million) were allocated for the BOC, 180,000 leva (\$121,294) for the Muslim community, 40,000 leva (\$26,954) for the Armenian Apostolic Church, 30,000 leva (\$20,216) for the Jewish community, and 40,000 leva (\$26,954) for other registered denominations.

Government Inaction

The government did not consistently enforce legal and policy protections of religious freedom.

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Mormon missionaries reported instances of police failing to respond on their behalf to incidents of apparent harassment. In July members of the church reported that police officers remained inactive while a group of teenagers attacked, punched, and kicked Mormon missionaries in Sofia.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Relations between religious groups generally remained tolerant and collaborative, especially within the Religious Communities Council, which discussed and defended common positions with the government. The BOC did not participate in the council. However, discrimination, harassment, and public intolerance of some religious groups remained persistent problems. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to complain that media reports misrepresented their activities and beliefs. Mormons continued to report harassment and denigration in the media, in particular from ultranationalist SKAT TV in Burgas and Varna.

On August 30, the prosecution service in Sofia filed an indictment against six persons, both Muslims and protesters, charging them with hooliganism for their actions during the May 2011 assault on Muslims attending Friday prayer in front of the Sofia mosque. At year's end, the court had not scheduled a hearing.

Jewish groups and the chief mufti's office continued to report desecration incidents. In January vandals threw Molotov cocktails at the windows of the regional mufti's office in Varna. In September hooligans spray-painted graffiti on a Jewish monument in Pleven, the third time the monument had been desecrated in 18 months.

Jewish community leaders privately expressed concern over reports of increasing and unrestricted incidents of anti-Semitism in social media.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported the VMRO stopped its harassment after a court convicted six persons of participating in a 2011 attack against a Jehovah's Witnesses group in Burgas and injuring five group members.

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In November volunteers in Sofia, including the mayor and civil society groups, joined together to clean up swastikas and other symbols of hate from buildings in a “Let’s Clean up Hatred” campaign.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly communicated with the Directorate for Religious Affairs and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination regarding religious freedom, discrimination cases, and construction of new places of worship. The ambassador met with the mayor of Sofia about the status of the chief mufti’s office’s plans for the construction of an Islamic education center and a second mosque in Sofia. Embassy representatives met frequently with leaders of the Jewish community, the chief mufti’s office, Mormons, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Embassy representatives also met with some of the Muslim defendants standing trial in Pazardjik. Embassy representatives visited the Muslim community in Breznitsa that was protesting the appointment to the local school of a principal with an alleged criminal background who had intimidated the staff and planned to discontinue religious classes in the school. An embassy representative attended a Friends of America event in Kardjali where the regional mufti made a presentation to a local audience about the role of religion in the United States, sharing his experience on religious diversity and tolerance. In July the U.S. embassy sponsored an iftar in southern Bulgaria. In October embassy representatives visited the mosque in Sofia during the “Week of Mosques” open doors initiative and met with a deputy chief mufti.

An embassy representative participated in two events discussing and promoting religious and ethnic tolerance in Sofia with leaders of the Jewish community.